



The Power of Touch

In a High-tech World, It Pays to Reach Out

Nora Brunner

Physician and holistic health pioneer Rachel Naomi Remen once confessed that as a pediatric intern she was an unrepentant baby kisser, often smooching her little patients as she made her rounds at the hospital. She did this when no one was looking because she sensed her colleagues would frown on her behavior, even though she couldn't think of a single reason not to do it.

The lack of basic human contact in our high-tech medical system reflects a larger social ill that has only recently started to get some attention--touch deprivation. The cultural landscape is puzzling. On the one hand, we are saturated in suggestive messages by the

skin-to-skin contact is beneficial to human health, American social norms inhibit this most basic form of human interaction and communication. Despite our supposedly enlightened attitudes, we Americans are among the most touch-deprived people in the world.

"Touch deprivation is a reality in American culture as a whole," writes Reverend Anthony David of Atlanta. "It's not just babies needing to be touched in caring ways, or the sick. It's not just doctors and nurses needing to extend it. It's all of us, needing connection, needing to receive it, needing to give it, with genuine happiness at stake."



High-tech can mean low-touch. Ensure you're getting the tactile connection humans require.

mass media; on the other hand, the caring pediatrician is afraid someone might look askance at her planting a kiss on a baby's forehead. What's wrong with this picture?

Social Norms

Unfortunately, touch has become, well, a touchy subject. Though there's growing scientific evidence that

Distant, Disconnected

How did we come to deprive ourselves so tragically? According to Texas psychology professor David R. Cross, PhD, there are three reasons Americans don't touch each other more: fear of sexual innuendo, societal and personal

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Office Hours and Contact

- Kumi
505-920-6120
mariarhodes@massagetherapy.com
www.mariarhodes.massagetherapy.com
Tuesday-Saturday by appointment

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disconnection aided by technology, and the fact that the ill effects of non-touching are simply not that obvious and don't receive much attention.

It's no surprise Americans are often afraid physical touching signals romantic interest, which leads to the twin perils of either having our intentions misunderstood or wondering if someone's gesture is an uninvited advance. This ambiguity is more than enough to scare most people from taking someone's arm or patting them on the back.

The potential for the loaded gesture is further complicated by our litigious society in which unwelcome touch can mean, or be interpreted as, dominance, sexual harassment, or exploitation. People in the helping professions are regularly counseled on how to do their jobs without creating even a hint of ambiguity. In one extreme example, counselors at a children's summer camp were given the advice that when kids proactively hugged them, the counselors were to raise both arms over their heads to show they hadn't invited the contact and weren't participating in it. One wonders how the innocent minds of children will interpret this bizarre response to their spontaneous affection.

Another reason for touch phobia, according to Cross, is that we live in a society with far-flung families and declining community connections. Technology plays a significant role in the way we communicate, and it seems we move farther away from face-to-face communication with every new invention. How ironic that the old telephone company jingle that encouraged us to "Reach Out and Touch Someone" gave way to the slew of electronic devices we have today, all ringing and beeping for our attention. While these devices were invented to improve communication, some people wonder if the net effect is lower quality in our exchanges of information.

While there is scientific research showing non-touch is detrimental to health, Cross says those negative effects aren't obvious. The effects of a lack of touch are insidious and long-term and don't amount to a dramatic story for prime time.

"Humans deprived of touch are prone to mental illness, violence, compromised immune systems, and poor self-regulation," Cross says. So serious are the effects of touch deprivation, it's considered by researchers to be worse than physical abuse.

Benefits of Touch

Stated more positively, science does support the preventive health benefits of touch. For example, Tiffany Field, PhD, founder of the Touch Research Institute, notes that in a study on preterm infants, massaging the babies increased their weight and allowed them to be discharged earlier. Discharging babies earlier from expensive neonatal intensive care units could save the healthcare system \$4.7 billion annually.

In other research, scientists at the University of North Carolina found the

stress hormone cortisol was reduced with hugging. Cortisol is associated with anger, anxiety, physical tension, and weakened immunity.

Massage therapy has been found useful in reducing symptoms such as anxiety, depression, pain, and stress, and is helpful for those suffering with a variety of illnesses, including anorexia nervosa, arthritis, cancer, fibromyalgia, and stroke. While more research is needed, massage therapy has also been shown to reduce symptoms associated with alcohol withdrawal and smoking cessation, and can strengthen self-esteem, boost the immune system, increase flexibility, and improve sleep.

As a nation, we are still finding our way in terms of increasing our touch quotient; but those who make their way into a massage therapy room are farther along than most.



Massage helps boost self-worth and contribute to emotional well-being and connection.

Deep, But Not Too Deep

fingertips for the client

Art Riggs

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Clients commonly request deep tissue massage for its lasting benefits--and it just plain feels good. But it's important to let your therapist know just how deep you want your massage. Here are some ways to help you communicate with your therapist to increase or decrease the intensity.

Verbal Feedback

Your therapist really wants to know how you feel about your massage. Feedback early on in the session is important.

-Use positive reinforcement. For instance, if the work is too light, a gentle, "That feels good, but I could take more pressure" is usually sufficient. As more pressure is applied, compliment your therapist for applying the proper deep pressure ("That is a great depth for me to really relax").

-Always let your therapist know if the work is too intense. Even the most careful therapist may sometimes go too deep. Simply saying that the pressure is a "bit much for me" is usually perfect so that your comments don't sound like criticism.

-Help establish the proper pace of the session.

1. Pain may be a result of working too fast rather than too hard. Let your therapist know that you could relax into the stroke a little easier if it were slower.
2. Working too fast might be a result of trying to accomplish too much in too little time. If you have problem areas, consider booking a longer massage or having spot work rather than a rushed, full-body session.

-The one-to-10 scale is a good guideline. If necessary, speak out when the intensity reaches a six or seven so the therapist knows not to increase pressure.

Nonverbal Cues

MT Straight Talk

What Your Massage Therapist Needs to Know

Angela England

Most massage therapists guide first-time clients through an intake process that includes discussing health histories and other medical concerns. But talking with your therapist about these things should not end with your first massage. Before each session, take a minute to speak with your therapist about any new medical conditions or injuries, lasting aches and pains, or any other changes in your life. Here are some of the issues your massage therapist should know about.

Medical Changes

It's a good idea to regularly update your medical record with your therapist, especially if you've been diagnosed with an illness or medical condition--such as high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, a chronic autoimmune disease,

or skin allergies--or are taking any new medications. Certain medical concerns preclude you from receiving massage. Other conditions, such as pregnancy, simply change the way your practitioner approaches the session.

A New or Acute Injury

Maybe you spent hours driving to a destination getaway and your shoulders ache, or you stepped off the porch wrong and sprained your ankle. Any time you have a new ache, pain, sprain, twist, or pulled muscle, mention it to your therapist. Depending on the location and extent of your injury, the session may need to be postponed or the injury site avoided until more healing has occurred.

Personal Preferences

This category is less obvious, but equally important. Everyone has unique preferences and sometimes there may be something you would like to change for your next massage. Whether you want to bring your own music, have the temperature adjusted, or be draped in an extra blanket, your therapist can easily adapt as long as you communicate your preferences.

Help your practitioner help you. Take a moment to check in with him or her before your next session.

Angela England enjoys doing massage, gardening, writing, and spending time with her three young children.

*Tomorrow with
the golden
sun...may my
wings do the
growing and my
roots do the
flying.*

-Juan Ramon Jimenez

Dear Reader,

Summer is well underway and hopefully we are all staying active and enjoying the season. In this newsletter, you will find great tips on how to use breath to reduce stress, the importance of drinking enough water, and how to make informed choices about sun exposure. I hope you benefit from this information. Please let me know if there are topics you would like to see in future newsletters.

Best Wishes,

Maria

Maria Rhodes

1001 Camino De Chelly
Santa Fe, NM 87505-6262



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